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Gentry, North Todd

Our first letter carriers

Columbia [Mo.]

[1911]

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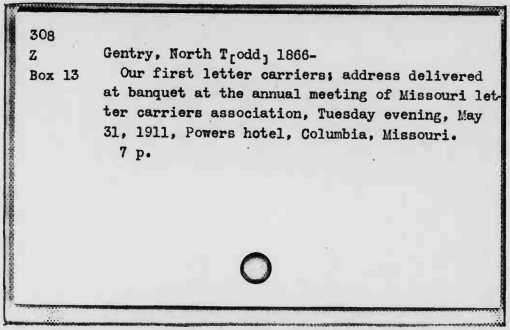

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Gentry, North T[odd] 1866-
Our first letter carriers; address delivered at banquet at the annual meeting of Missouri letter carriers association, Tuesday evening, May 31, 1911, Powers hotel, Columbia, Missouri.
7 p.

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OUR FIRST LETTER CARRIERS

Address Delivered at Banquet at the Annual Meeting of Missouri Letter Carriers Association

TUESDAY EVENING, MAY 31, 1911
POWERS HOTEL
COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

BY
NORTH T. GENTRY
OF COLUMBIA

OUR FIRST LETTER CARRIERS

In introducing Mr. Gentry, the toastmaster of the occasion, Mr. James W. Welch, said:—"The next speaker is North Todd Gentry, of Columbia, formerly Assistant Attorney General of Missouri. The only objection that any of us Boone county people have to friend Gentry is that he is a republican. But one of his grandfathers was a democrat, his other grandfather was a whig, and his father was a democrat part of the time, a republican part of the time, an independent part of the time and a good citizen all of the time. Mr. Gentry's grandmother, Mrs. Ann Gentry, widow of General Richard Gentry, was appointed postmistress in Columbia in 1838, the first woman in the United States to be honored with such an appointment. It is, therefore, appropriate that Mr. Gentry should this evening respond to the toast, 'Our First Letter Carriers.'"

Mr. Gentry spoke as follows:

Mr. Toastmaster and Gentlemen of the Missouri Letter Carriers Association:

After listening to the improved methods of mail service that have been mentioned and discussed by some of your members, I have been reminded of some things that my father told me of the primitive methods that Uncle Sam's mail was carried in Boone county

some years before the civil war, during the time that his mother was postmistress in the old village of Columbia. Columbia was on the state road, which extended from St. Louis, through St. Charles and on to Independence, crossing the Missouri river at Arrow Rock, which was said to be the narrowest point on the river. This state road practically followed the line of the Boon's Lick road, about which we have heard so much in recent days. At intervals along said road, there were "stage stands," which were places where a new driver and fresh horses could be obtained, when needed, and hotel accommodations furnished a few people. About half a mile west of Perche creek, on the present Columbia and Rocheport gravel road, was the home of Ishmael Vanhorn, and his place was a stage stand. A similar place was located on the farm of Dr. Geo. R. Jacobs, eight miles east of Columbia, on the St. Charles state road; and a similar place was located on the farm of Jno. G. Vivion, nine miles east of Columbia on the Columbia and Cedar creek gravel road. This state road, which was hardly worthy of being called a road, was traveled at irregular intervals by the old-fashioned stage coach, which was sometimes drawn by four horses and sometimes by six, and the mail and a few passengers accompanied the driver on his long, lonely and ofttimes dangerous journey. The stage driver was a great man in his day,—great in his own estimation and great in the estimation of the

small boys, both white and black. Even the grown up boys admired the stage driver so much that they had difficulty in trying to decide whether they wanted their boys to become preachers or stage drivers. Ordinarily, Columbia had mail twice a week, unless the swollen streams or bad roads delayed the travel. It several times happened that three weeks or more passed without any mail coming to Columbia, and then two or three wagonloads would arrive at once, and sometimes at the inconvenient hour of eleven o'clock at night.

The arrival of the stage in Columbia was an important event, far surpassing the arrival of a train of cars at the present time. When the stage reached the hill on Broadway just north of Stephens College, which was then the eastern limits of Columbia, the driver would take out his little brass horn, blow a sort of tune, crack his whip and drive his horses full speed down Broadway to the post office. All at once, he would apply the brakes, pull his horses back on their haunches, toss his lines out to one of the many persons there assembled, pitch the mail bags out and walk into the bar room and take a drink. By that time, every man and boy in town was at the post office, anxious to see such an athlete and hero and eager to hear the news but still more eager to get the news directly from the lips of the stage driver. But not a word would the driver say till, with an air of dignity and greatness, he would climb down from his prominent

position and visit the bar room. I said that he would blow his horn, which was true, for even in that early day, the stage driver, like the modern politician and so-called reformer, realized the value of blowing his own horn. After sufficiently quenching his thirst, the driver would return to the street and was then ready to talk business, religion, politics or anything else. He knew the news of the neighboring towns along the road, and he always had in stock a lot of interesting stories regarding his trip, many of which were thrilling and amusing. His experiences in crossing the unbridged streams, his efforts to guide his "coach and four" through the muddy, narrow passes, along the rocky cliffs, and up the steep hills, and his contests with wild beasts and savage men, were not only interesting to boys and adults alike, but had they been written and preserved, would have been entertaining to us. To say that the stage driver of that day, with his commanding figure and still greater commanding voice, his long whip, his hands full of lines, driving his prancing steeds, was the "admired of all admirers," is but putting it mildly.

It was mentioned a while back that the stage driver, after stopping in town, would pitch his reins out to others, and that he would leave the stage. This was true; for the stage driver never fed, nor hitched up nor unhitched his horses. That work, he left for the stable men; neither did he grease the wheels nor

repair the stage while he was in town; leaving that duty for others. The stage driver considered himself far above such menial work; he was a stage driver,—he was a letter-carrier,—he was a gentlemen.

Another thing that should be mentioned about the stage driver, and that is this; he was general manager of the trip, and master of all those who rode in the stage. It was distinctly understood when a ticket for stage transportation was sold that if the stage broke down, or stuck in the mud, the passengers must assist the driver in every way possible. And the stage driver never had a better opportunity to act the boss, and never enjoyed any opportunity more, than when he was having passengers to carry rails and prize the heavy vehicle out of a mud hole, or when they were trying to repair a broken wheel or fix a tongue or double-tree.

During one summer the stage from the west reached Columbia a little after daylight each morning. Edward Camplin, who lived on the place now occupied by Arthur E. Limerick, just west of Columbia on the Rocheport gravel, was the owner of a bull; and it was the custom of the bull to lie down in the middle of the road and spend the night. When the stage would come along so early in the morning, the bull had not finished his beauty nap and therefore was not ready to get up; thereby causing the driver to dismount from his lofty seat and drive the animal out of

the road. This was extremely annoying to the stage driver, who considered it beneath his dignity to drive bulls. He complained to Mr. Camplin, and, in the name of Uncle Sam, ordered that the bull be confined. But no attention was paid to these complaints, nor to the driver's threats to paralyze the bull. After being delayed and annoyed many times, the driver concluded that he would run over the bull with his stage, and thus forever settle matters. On seeing the apparently slumbering bovine at the usual place in the road one morning, the stage driver cracked his whip and started down the hill, driving his six horses at full speed. He guided them to one side of his bullship, and suddenly pulled them toward him so as to run the front wheel of the stage over the bull's back. But instead of being killed, the bull humped his back, straightened out his legs and raised up his body, breaking the coupling pole, uncoupling the running gear and pitching the stage and passengers into a ditch. The stage looked like it had been struck by a cyclone, the passengers thought that they had experienced an earthquake and the driver was hurled head first against a tree; and the wreckage resembled that ancient building a few moments after blind Samson regained his strength. The horses ran off toward the stable in Columbia, carrying the front wheels of the stage with them, the passengers fussed as only stage passengers could, and the unfortunate driver walked into town,

his clothes torn, his back hurt, his head bruised, his nose bloody, his shoulder knocked down and lame in both feet. To add to his humiliation, the bull was not hurt, and the owner, who was sitting near by on his front porch, saw the whole performance and called out, "I bet you never try it again." When the driver came to town that morning, he did not blow his horn neither did he crack his whip, but he was as humble as a penitent sinner on the mourner's bench. He was brim-full of news, but no one save the agent of the stage company could pump any information from him.

Mr. Toastmaster, these were the primitive methods of carrying the mail in this city and county; while today we have good streets in our city, reasonably good roads in our county, and free delivery in both city and county. In place of the stage driver, with his pomp and tyranny, making irregular trips, we have the courteous letter carriers, both town and rural, who are ever prompt, sober, reliable and ready to accommodate the public, and who even go out of their way to do a patron a favor. Let us hope that the letter carriers, who have done so much to advance our civilization, will, in carrying information from house to house, from town to country and from country to town, continue to improve our land and benefit our homes. And let us also hope that in the near future these letter carriers will receive a reward commensurate with their valuable service.

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